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C O N F I D E N T I A L ANKARA 008532

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BEHIND THE MAN: THE FAMILY OF NEW TURKISH PM
ABDULLAH GUL

REF: ANKARA 8358

(C) Classified by Acting Political Counselor Nicholas Kass.
Reason: 1.5 (b)(d).

1. (C) Summary and comment: Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gul (reftel), Number Two man in the Islam-influenced AK (Justice and Development) Party of R. Tayyip Erdogan, is a democrat and political reformist who nonetheless heads a family that takes Islam seriously and reflects his own moral proclivities. End summary.

2. (C) Gul's wife Hayrunnisa and three children share and reflect the PM's strong Muslim faith. The 40ish Mrs. Gul wears the Islamic headscarf (note: as do approximately half of the wives of the AK Government ministers. End comment.) Married young (before the age of 16), Hayrunnisa Gul could be considered by many elite Turks as a stereotypical covered Muslim wife. Yet she has a noticeable if demure presence of her own, reflected in her conservative yet stylish attire, opulent yet tasteful jewelry -- and her steely determination to challenge Kemalist propriety. She has a case pending against the Turkish State in the European Court of Human Rights for denying her matriculation at Ankara University Faculty of Letters for wearing the headscarf; she had passed the admissions test (which, in more traditionalist fashion, she took after her children were grown) with flying colors. A similar case was scheduled for the ECHR Nov. 19, which could serve as a precedent.

-- The soft-spoken Hayrunnisa presents herself as a woman more concerned with her family than her husband's political ambitions. Privately to poloff, Hayrunnisa has been quick to point out that her husband is the politician in the family. She nevertheless also staunchly defends her political affiliation, her country, her religion, and her right -- attenuated, in her view, by the Turkish State's outmoded and overly harsh understanding of secularism -- to practice her religion.

-- The Gul's daughter, Kubra, 19, is herself engaged on the headscarf front as a student at Ankara's Bilkent University, where English is the language of instruction. Though Bilkent is known for its more open and dynamic approach to education -- particularly when compared to bastions of Kemalism such as Ankara University -- Kubra Gul explained to poloff that she adheres to Muslim tradition by covering her head with a wig when in class -- thereby avoiding the risk of a head-on confrontation with GOT enforcers of Kemalist principles and being banned from classes (and we expect, embroiling her father in controversy). According to a senior AK official, preliminary negotiations are underway to arrange a marriage between Kubra Gul and one of Tayyip Erdogan's sons.

Comment

3. (C) Abdullah Gul is widely regarded even by many Kemalist secularists as an engaging, tolerant man, though one with deep convictions. These traits, and the evident importance of Islam to the Gul family, reflect a cardinal Ozalist virtue that is a key to success in Turkish politics, and to Turkish social peace: to be at once both modern and forward looking, yet with an abiding respect for the religious and traditional values.
PEARSON